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AUTHOR Kuhn-Osius, K. Eckhard; Kym, Annette
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of second language reading instruction to develop language proficiency examines the concept of reading proficiency, the reading processes used by native speakers and language learners, the importance of top-down and bottom-up reading, activating predicting and projecting skills, the difference between reading at the peak of one's proficiency and reading for proficiency, and three different types of reading texts. The three text types examined are: (1) the information text, which may be linguistically difficult for the student, but can be understood if the student consciously activates schemata and processes top-down; (2) the input text, so called because its function is to input text in the learning process; and (3) the grammatical display text, which may include textbook dialogues or chapter texts because they are explanatory only. Passages from German texts are used to distinguish the uses of the various text types. Selection of textbooks and authentic texts is discussed. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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USING READING TO PROMOTE PROFICIENCY

K. Eckhard Kuhn-Osius, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Hunter College
and Graduate School, CUNY

Annette Kym, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Hunter College, CUNY

While everybody talks about the 'Proficiency Movement,' numerous misunderstandings about it necessitate reflection on the question what Proficiency based teaching could mean. The other day we talked to a colleague in Russian who said they couldn't really do proficiency-oriented teaching since they only had three hours a week and thus the students could not gain proficiency. This is precisely the everyday-concept of proficiency which one should not associate with the 'Proficiency Movement.'

So what is 'Proficiency' about? First of all it is a method of testing, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), which tests what students can do with the language, what they can talk about, and how well they can do it. We are looking for more than 'communicative' ability and more than acquired structures. If one can "muddle one's way through" in a language, one has a certain proficiency; but the less one needs to muddle, the higher one is rated. The OPI takes into account language performance both below and above levels traditionally attended to in the classroom. It recognizes a 'muddling ability' that might only be good enough for an F in any class, but it also provides for speakers at the other end who do not 'muddle' at all -- an ability that cannot be achieved in classroom teaching (for a more detailed treatment with references see Kuhn-Osius).

What could "Proficiency based teaching" possibly mean? Phrased in such a global way, it means little. We know many things that work and many that do not, but we do not have an overall knowledge about activities that will lead to the highest proficiency in the shortest possible time (Byrnes, 112f). We have a strong hunch that "Proficiency based teaching" does not mean teaching to muddle -- that would be teaching for low proficiency. Instead of offering another panacea, let us advance the first part of a possible definition: Proficiency based teaching means first of all listening to what your students can really do. We have done this for the past four years or so at Hunter College by conducting dozens of interviews at the end of each semester.

At this point at least we have a very good idea what our students can do with their language in a life-like situation and how they are likely to progress. And this means we can tailor our demands concerning students' communicative language use to actual student ability. The proficiency orientation is not in any method, but in tailoring tasks to a level where students can perform them. In the past we assumed that students knew what we taught them, but could not specify the nature of this knowledge. Now we know what they know and insist on improving *life-like performance at their respective level* while *preparing them for the next higher level*. And this we shall use as a working definition of "Proficiency based teaching."

ON READING PROFICIENCY AND READING FOR PROFICIENCY

What does reading proficiency mean? This is a very problematic area, and the Proficiency Guidelines may be in for some revision (Bernhardt). Reading Proficiency

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means the ability to get information from a written text in life-like situations. There are several problem areas in rating Reading Proficiency, which will be addressed as questions mostly without definitive answers.

1. How do we test how much readers have understood? We must ask them questions or observe their bevahior. If we ask questions in the FL, we may really test if students can understand not only the text, but also the questions, and if their active command is good enough to answer in the FL. But even if we ask in English, we may be testing recall, and we may ask questions about precisely that which a student happened to not understand, while we pass by that which was understood

2. What does it mean to understand a text? How much information is there in a text and how much does one have to get out to understand it? The short-run answer is that a reader at any level can 'read' any text, but the amount of information extracted varies greatly. There is a story about a speed reader who read *War and Peace*. As he was asked what he learned from it, he answered "It's about Russia." So, we see, anybody can get some information out of any text, even if it's not more than that it's foreign. On the other hand, one can write articles and perhaps books about understanding a brief poem.

3. What is an easy text, and is it ever possible to say that a text is easy or hard across the board? In graduate reading courses I found that students had trouble with introductory texts for junior high schools, but could handle specialized texts in their discipline quite well, since they brought a lot more knowledge to them. This was most true in the sciences. On the other hand, supposedly easy texts such as menus may be linguistically quite difficult. The lively debate regarding "readability formulas" for childrens' books and school books in the USA attests to the fact that the difficulty of reading texts cannot easily be ascertained.

There is an emerging consensus among reading researchers that reading is a mixture of bottom-up and top-down processing involving the entire world-knowledge of the reader (Carell et al.). What all this means is that readers will read for meaning, the better one reads, the more one will read 'through' the text for the meaning. Depending on how closely the text corresponds to the schemata of the readers, the faster they will read, projecting what is most likely to appear next in the text. One could also envision a text which is so predictable that readers put it down since they have already projected the end. In other words: Reading is a process of mediation between things known and things unknown. If one knows nothing that connects with the text, there will be no mediation; if the text contains nothing new, there will be no mediation either (these two are the theoretical end poles of a spectrum).

The following examples show that 'reading' is strongly influenced by word recognition and projection. It is not a pure bottom-up process of putting together words from their constitutive elements, but rather a very rapid process of recognition, classification, and projection. It is much easier to process and to recall letter sequences accepted in the lexicon of the English language or that at least follow the rules of word formation in English, the code, as it were. For meaningful prediction, the number of possible word completions is limited according to the rules of word formation and, in most cases, restricted to those combinations that are accepted as part of English vocabulary. It may be easier or harder to predict whole words and sentence completions, depending on the

numerous rules and constraints imposed by phonetic, morphological, syntactical, or logical restrictions. Many restrictions are also imposed by world knowledge, since one knows that certain situations are more likely to occur in real life and thus are more likely to be talked about than others. The classifications used for the following listings are approximate.

Uncoded vs. coded input
tcas, tsac, skcud, lyejl
cats, cast, ducks, jelly

Uncodable and codable input
smmiy, isktteiac
mimsy, sickitate

Prediction of letter sequences:
c...t (cat, cot, cut, caught ..., but no single consonant, no i or e ...)
prot..... (protect, protest, protean, protract, protuberance ... and derivatives)

Prediction of words:
The cat ..... the hat comes back. (must be a preposition, with cultural knowledge of Dr. Seuss, one can predict with much more certainty)
I did not like ..... look on ..... face. (must be determiners)
The ..... of Mr. Prendergast's transactions is amazing. (no prediciton possible)
The ..... of Mr. Boesky's transactions is mind boggling. (most likely size or criminality for those who remember the inside trading scandal)
President Kennedy was ..... in Dallas. (most likely: shot, murdered, ...)
Evolution proceeds by the principle of nat.... selection.
The United States will soon have a nat.... election.
Mr. John Doe appears to be a nat.... candidate. (national, natural, nativist, ...)

Native language readers can spell their way through a text like a child learning to read, slowly recovering sounds from letters, words from sounds, sentences from words, and texts from sentences. This pure bottom-up method is obviously not effective, and it presupposes a rather simple text and message. Thus, it is not used much by experienced readers. There is no need to spell through everything because one knows what to expect and looks for it.

Projection in reading can be based on various areas of redundancy in a text, i.e. rules to which words, texts, and the world conform. These can be grouped as follows:

probability of letter combinations
probability of sentence structure
probability of collocations and combinations of words
probability of logical structures in a text
world knowledge and schemata. (Westhoff, 41)

There are a number of things that can be done to help foreign language readers by increasing their skills in top-down processing. Learners generally cannot make much use of the first three areas of redundancy (letter combinations, sentence structure, word combinations,) since these are the areas still to be studied/acquired. Teaching them more of the language would improve their abilities in localized projecting as well as bottom-up processing, but it takes a long time. Teaching them to project and activate

their logical ability and world knowledge can be done fairly quickly, since it relies mostly on knowledge and strategies students have at their disposal anyway, even if they may not use them.

Projecting and predicting are limited by the world knowledge a reader can activate or the amount of information that can be supplied in short order. The science students mentioned above had certain knowledge which other people had not. In evaluating their paraphrases of highly specialized articles, their non-scientist instructor had to rely largely on the reverse process, paying attention to syntax etc., i.e. he had to process the texts from the bottom up. Helpful and necesary as it is, our world knowledge may lead us astray. In a recent study, students were given a text about Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev appearing on Soviet and U.S. television respectively (Bernhardt/ Berkemeyer, p. 17-22, 26). Most students read the text as a text about peace talks. Their top-down processing enabled them to connect Reagan and Gorbachev in a meaningful way, but their bottom-up processing prevented them from finding the textual evidence that invalidated their hypothesis. This is mentioned to avoid the misunderstanding that for foreign language reading "top-down" is somehow 'better' than "bottom-up". One needs both.

To help students reach the peak of their proficiency in reading, it is necessary to practice predicting and help them operate at the edge of their linguistic and cognitive capabilities. Whether having to rely on existent schemata with insufficient recourse to bottom-up processing can help us in getting information about unfamiliar things is doubtful. In other words, could one learn much about theoretical physics if one knew neither the physics nor the language well? Probably not, but this would be reading on a Superior or higher level, which is beyond our reach in most instructional situations.

Another aspect that must be addressed here is not reading proficiency, but reading <u>for</u> proficiency. Stephen Krashen (1982) essentially says that all you need is comprehensible input to acquire a language. While the extreme form of this hypothesis is overstated (Dihoff), it seems obvious that reading at a level which is slightly above one's ability (at i+1) will be beneficial to one's language acquisition. If nothing else, one will broaden one's vocabulary and improve one's general fluency and readiness. The question is now, to what extent reading at the peak of one's proficiency and reading <u>for</u> proficiency can be the same thing.

Reading practice in the sense of prediciting practice most likely will not provide students with reading experiences slightly above their level. In fact, as long as they read at a level of i+1, they may not need any reading practice per se, because their language knowledge and their knowledge of schemata would be more or less balanced. As long as students have to largely rely on their schemata with imperfect control from bottom-up processing, they are, in effect, "muddling through" the language. If students operate at the limit of their predictive abilities in reading, the benefit to general language proficiency will operate close to zero. One reason is that the strong focus on content precludes extensive intake, another reason is that being able to predict a meaning 'from context' makes attention to the predicted 'word' unnecessary. It is only with texts that are truly at i+1 that this intake can take place. A student who cannot yet narrate about concrete events will benefit little from abstract deliberations and argumentation. On the other hand, if such a student is exposed to an interesting story on a concrete level without too many schema breaks, language has a much better

chance of being acquired in a pleasurable fashion. In this case the interaction between top-down and bottom-up processing has a chance to be what it is in first-language reading, i.e. non-conscious or semi-conscious, focussed on the content of the text and not on ways to figure out the content.

The thoughts above indicate that there are two types of reading texts for the emerging reader. The first tends to be over the students' h ls linguistically but can be understood if students consciously activate schemata and process top-down. This type of text can contribute information to what students know, but understanding often is very incomplete compared to what a native would understand and remains tied to previous knowledge. This type of text will be called "information text". The second type of text may be conveniently called "input text, " since that is its function in the learning process. The boundary between the two types is fluid, depending on where students are. One may surmise that the dichotomy between the two types disappears as a learner approaches and finally reaches a level of Superior. Both types of texts may play important roles in the overall development of a student's language ability, but being aware of their differences will be helpful.

There is a third type of reading text. It is a grammatical display text. Textbook dialogs or chapter texts in later chapters tend to be display texts, since they cover tasks that a student cannot really handle, but they display how some grammatical phenomena and vocabulary are used. The texts may be valuable explanative tools and should be treated as such. One should be aware of the fact that many textbook dialogues are actually for reading and analysis only.

The reading texts in most textbooks lead a life on the edge between being information texts and being display texts. Most of them permit little activation of schemata, partly because they try so hard to tell new things about all German-speaking countries. Linguistically, they are difficult texts pretending to be easy. They are far beyond students' active proficiency level, but tend to be so doctored that they permit neither input reading nor information reading. Besides, most exercises presuppose that students in the first year can really discuss abstract cultural topics in German. In other words, we tend to have non-texts with unmanageable speaking tasks.

READING TO PROMOTE PROFICIENCY

When we talk about three different types of text (information, input, display texts), what are the practical implications for the classroom? The following will present some texts and how they have been treated in our classrooms. We will begin with information texts, since they are the most common type of text to be found in real life. We will talk especially about three short stories used in our fourth semester, presenting both pre-reading activities and post-reading tasks. The presentation continues with some input texts and a display text. Our students in the first year may reach a level of Intermediate Low/Mid, the second year may bring them up to Intermediate Mid/ High, while the third year (voluntary) typically has students in the Intermediate Mid/High range with some reaching Advanced. This fact must be kept in mind when looking at the following texts and their proposed treatment.

For all texts that can be classified as information texts, pre-reading exercises should be done, keeping the students' proficiency level in mind. It is important that students

focus on what will be presented in a text before they begin to read it. By asking themselves "What do I expect to read in this text? " and "What do I already know about this subject?" the stage is set for a more successful reading experience. Pre-reading can consist of vocabulary work (e.g. definitions), we have also used pictures to work with vocabulary or explain cultural background (see illustration). Other activities

have included a mini-lesson in geography and history on a level at which students function, i.e. simple sentences that an Intermediate speaker can understand(practice of listening!). One can explain in simple sentences that during World War II not only soldiers but many civilians were killed and many were missing after the war. This is necessary information for one of the stories discussed below. After becoming familiar with certain facts, students can read the texts with much more success.

We have also used pre-reading exercises to review and reinforce grammar. The following exercise reviews past tense verb forms, based on information from a story discussed below:

1. Sie fielen sich in die Arme.
2. Sie riefen "Du!"
3. Sie standen sich gegenüber.
4. Sie spurten und horten die anderen Leute nicht.
5. Die anderen Leute beschwerten sich, aber das störte sie nicht. ...

Students read the sentences and then transformed them into the present perfect tense, the tense that is more important for their active usage at the Intermediate level.

After one has prepared and read a text, the question is what to do afterwards. After all, we must do something with these texts in class. To find out what students understand, one must ask them in English. But to obtain progress in 'active proficiency,' one must work with the text in the target language as well. One should not ask someone fresh out of the requirement to tell in German what the ethical implications are of Little Red Riding Hood's straying from the straight path to her grandmother's house. Discussing in abstract fashion the conflicting demands of obedience, freedom, revolt against authority, and avoiding of mortal danger is linguistically not easy, even if "Little Red Riding Hood" is not a hard text to understand (a typical problem in dealing with fairy tales). Instead, one must tailor the tasks to what students can do. The Proficiency Guidelines offer a clear notion of what one can demand of students going through the Intermediate level: concrete tasks in general, simple description, and retelling.

Max von der Grün, "Masken"

Two former lovers run into each other at the Cologne train station. They both talk about their successes in life, which had been a sore point during their relationship. Both of them are lying, but because they believe each other's lies they are afraid to try to reestablish their relationship, although they both would like to.

This story (Isaak/Ray, 29-35) is a text at the border between an input text and an information text for some of our students, but strongly tending towards the latter. It can be understood due to various factors: Students can relate to the schemata present in the text, the language is not too difficult, and the text is straightforward and does not require students to draw many inferences.

SCHEMATA (top-down)
Known: - Place: train station, café;
- Interpersonal relationships: former lovers meet again by accident;
- Time frame: a day in July (today);
- Professional life and careers.

Unknown: - Geography;
- possibly train station.

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS (bottom-up)
- all tenses are present in the text;
- indicative and subjunctive forms occur;
- active and passive voice;
- glossary explains most important unknown words;
- sentence structure is relatively simple (appr. 75 words per sentence); only first paragraph contains very long sentence with subordinate clauses;
*-punctuation.

The students have been taught general grammar in the previous three semesters and should be able to handle all structures passively. Bottom-up processing is within reach as much as necessary. Punctuation is a problem, however, since the author does not use quotation marks. Without outward signals, the text moves from comments by the narrator to dialogue between the main characters and to their thoughts:

> Dann haben wir ja beide Glück gehabt, sagte sie, und dachte, daß er immer noch gut aussieht. Gewiß, er war älter geworden, aber das steht ihm gut. Schade, wenn er nicht so eine Bombenstellung hätte, ich würde ihn frage, ja, ich ihn, ob er noch an den dummen Streit von damals denkt und ob er mich noch haben will. Ja, ich würde ihn fragen. Aber jetzt? (Isaak/Ray, p. 31)

This difficulty must resolved to facilitate bottom-up processing: The class was divided into groups, each group being assigned part of the text. Each group then had to figure out for its segment what Eric says, what he thinks, what Renate says, what she thinks, and what the narrator says. Then the different roles were read. This gave the text a 'three-dimensional' aspect and helped the two lines of processing, bottom-up and top-down, to interact. Top-down processing is relatively easy since the story deals with human relationships and behavior that are not culture-specific for either the U.S. or Germany, and bottom-up processing has been facilitated by the classrom exercise.

The next step is to use the reading material to promote overall proficiency. Students usually are now ready to actively use the information from the text. Since the students can function at an Intermediate level, characterized by the ability to ask and answer questions, dialogues are an ideal format. Obviously, "Masken" lends itself well to this kind of task. The following outline was projected on an overhead projector to provide students with a framework within which their own dialogue had to take place:

Erich	**Renate**
Mein Gott! Das ist ja	
Wie .....?	
	Gut, und dir?
	Wir haben uns schon lange nicht mehr .....
	Es ist ..... her!
Eine	Mas machst du jetzt?
	..... verheiratet?
	..... arbeitest .....?
Ich	
Ich	
Ich	
Und du?	.....
	.....
	.....
	Wohin?
Ich bin geschaftlich	
Und du?	Ich .....

Another exercise that proved helpful was a questionnaire concentrating on the major facts in the story:

1. Personen:
2. Alter (ca.):
3. Ort:
4. Jahreszeit:
5. Tageszeit:
6. Wohnort von Renate:
7. Reiseziel von Renate:
8. Wohnort von Erich:
9. Reiseziel von Erich:
10. Renates Beruf:
11. Erichs Beruf:
12. Personenstand, Grunde dafur:
    - Renate
    - Erich
13. Wann haben sie sich getrennt? Warum?
14. Die Gefuhle von beiden heute?

Otto Flake, "Der Brief"

A man has his attic cleaned. By accident he finds a letter which he wrote 20 years ago to his wife who had just eloped. In it he had offered her that she could return, but she had never replied. Now he finds that he accidentally did not mail the letter.

This story (Isaak/Ray, p. 17-20) is an information text for the students, comparable to "Masken." It is much more difficult, but students can still process it top-down.

SCHEMATA (top-down)
Known: - place: house and garden;
- interpersonal relationships: estranged couple:

- activities: cleaning the attic;
- objects: a letter that was never sent;
- double time frame: 1935 and 1955.

Unknown: - geography: location of Partenkirchen;
- history;
- cultural information: role of a housekeeper.

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS (bottom-up)
- all tenses;
- indicative and subjunctive;
- active and passive;
- extensive amount of unknown words in glossary;
- sentence structure is very difficult (appr. 16 words per sentence)

The students can recognize individual words, but the length and complexity of the sentences as well as the looseness of their connective features obscure the general topics and interculturally transferable schemata so much that the Intermediate student can no longer decipher the story:

> ... Was war das? Er hatte damals, es mußte 1935 gewesen sein, Lis unter dieser Adresse geschrieben und keine Antwort erhalten. Und dieser Brief hier, der offenbar nicht abgeschickt worden war, wie ordnete er sich ein, was hatte es mit ihm auf sich? Er ging ins Zimmer zurück, setzte sich an den Schreibtisch und schnitt den Brief auf. Da stand das Datum, von vor zwanzig Jahren. Erster Juli 1935. und da stand, daß er, von ihrem Brief aus Partenkirchen erschüttert, nach reichlicher Uberlegung bereit sei, sie wieder aufzunehmen, zu vergessen und einen neuen Abschnitt mit ihr zu beginnen unter der Bedingung, daß sie vorerst nur als zwei Hausgenossen miteinander verkehrten. (Isaak/Ray, 18)

The teacher must facilitate understanding of this text. First the events of 1935 had to be separated from the ones of 1955. This was done with an exercise that offered listening practice as well. Sentences paraphrasing certain aspects of the text were written on large pieces of paper and randomly read to the class. The students, who had done a first reading of the story at home, had to locate the action either in 1935 or 1955. The sheets of paper were put on the board under the respective date. Students were then asked to sort the sentences chronologically according to the text. This paraphrasing helped the students understand the crucial part of the text: that the letter was written but never sent. Once the students had understood this, the class proceeded tro a writing exercise. As a group or homework assignment, the letter was composed. The task was extended further sometimes by assigning an imaginary response. In this way a difficult information text could be 'brought down' and used to promote overall proficiency.

Heinrich Böll, "Du fährst zu oft nach Heidelberg"

A young man has just finished his teacher training. He went to the university after being trained for a manual trade and was helped in his efforts by the attention he attracted as a bicycle racer. He earned some money as a student by giving various language classes to adults and also is helping political refugees from Chile. He seems to have difficulties in finding employment, which are somehow connected with his frequent trips to Heidelberg. Everyone suggests he should go to Heidelberg less often, but he is never clearly told why. In the end he

seems to be resolved to keep-up his visits there.

SCHEMATA (top-down)

- system of vocational training in West Germany;
- educational system in West Germany;
- different social classes and their political leanings;
- prestige of various professions;
- relationship between education and job prospects;
- political situation in Chile after 1973;
- status of people seeking political asylum in West Germany;
- political mood in the 70's, "Radikalenerlaß";
- civil service system;
- cycling;
- time frame: Sunday and Monday in June, with references to years in the protagonist's past
- place: protagonist's apartment, parents' home, fiancée's home, brother's apartment, office in the ministry of education

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS (bottom-up)

- all tenses;
- indicative and subjunctive;
- active and passive;
- vocabulary is standard and many words are glossed;
- sentence structure is complex, with relative clauses, extended adjective constructions, etc. (appr. 17.5 words per sentence).

This is an extremely difficult text (Isaak/Ray, 75-82) that can no longer be read in a better than global fashion by most students in the fourth semester, and we can see why The lengthy list of schemata and the length of the summary show the complexity of this story, which cannot be processed top-down. An additional difficulty of the text is that many things are only alluded to, and the students have to make inferences to grasp the meaning. They may be able to understand particular passages from bottom up, but the overall understanding is lacking due to the missing frame of reference.

In certain passages a very precise understanding of details is necessary, as in the following sentence:

> Er hatte doch an der Volkshochschule mit seinen Spanisch-, am spanischen Abendgymnasium mit seinen Deutschkursen Erfolg gehabt.(Isaak/Ray, 76)

The different usage of the prepositions *mit* and *in* (or *bei*) with *Erfolg haben* is crucial. The sentence is the only indication in the text that the protagonist worked as a part-time teacher at a school of continuing education and a Spanish evening school. Students in a fourth-semester German class can usually not grasp such details Reading in detail is a Superior- level task.

Given the difficulties inherent in a text like this, one may seriously consider not using it with Intermediate-level students. But, provided one does want to use it, what can one do? The unknown cultural and historical frameworks have to be given. Depending on the time one can spend on pre-reading activities, one can explain certain concepts in simple German. Others, however, are too complex and need explanation in English, e.g. the civil service system in Germany or the *Radikalenerlaß*.

One exercise to sharpen students' cognitive skills was the following: The instructor paraphrased passages or sentences, put them on the overhead projector, and asked students to find the corresponding passage in the text. This exercise shows students that an idea can be expressed more simply, and it helps them with their later writing assignments:

Er war statt nach Hause nach Heidelberg gefahren, hatte Diego und Teresa nicht angetroffen, auch Raoul nicht. Diegos Freund; war auf der Ruckfahrt in eine
1. Autoschlange geraten, gegen neun bei seinem Bruder Karl vorbeigefahren, der ihm Bier aus dem Eisschrank holte, wahrend Hilde ihm Spiegeleier briet; sie sahen gemeinsam im Fernsehen eine Reportage uber die Tour de Suisse, bei der
2. Eddy Merckx keine gute Figur machte, und als er wegging, hatte Hilde ihm einen
3. Papiersack voll abgelegter Kinderkleider gegeben für "diesen spirrigen netten Chilenen und seine Frau."

1. Bei seinem Bruder und seiner Schwagerin aß er Abendessen.
2. Eddy Merckx fuhr nicht gut bei der Tour des Suisse.
3. Hilde hat Kleider, die ihren Kindern zu klein sind. Sie gibt sie für die Chilenen mit.

Another exercise involved writing down a list of activities and having the students order them chronologically according to what the protagonist did on Sunday morning, noon, afternoon, etc. These facts then served as the basis for retelling the simple events of the story. More cannot really be done with this text, since any further discussion would involve stating and defending opinion or talking about abstract ideas -- all Superior-level tasks.

INPUT TEXTS

Input texts are hard to find at the earlier levels, especially if one wants authentic materials. Children's literature provides excellent texts, if one's students do not object. Since input texts are easily read, one should not smother them with extensive exercises. The following text is from Ursula Wolfel's *Achtundzwanzig Lachgeschichten*:

> Einmal wollte eine große Familie verreisen: Mutter, Vater und vier Kinder. Sie haben auf dem Bahnsteig gestanden, und alle waren sehr aufgeregt. Am aufgeregtesten war das kleinste Kind. Der Zug ist gekommen, und der Vater hat die Koffer genommen, die Mutter hat die Taschen genommen, und die großen Kinder haben den Korb mit den Butterbroten und das Netz mit den Apfelsinen und die Limonadenflasche und den Fotoapparat genommen. Das kleinste Kind sollte nur seinen Teddy tragen ... (Wolfel, p. 30)

The train comes, the youngest child disappears, is frantically sought, and is finally found sitting in the train waiting for the others. The simplicity of this story is clear from the few lines quoted above (almost half of the story). Understanding is aided by pictures that accompany each story in the book. Pre-reading activities for these stories are unnecessary from the second semester on up. To check comprehension it is enough to a look at the picture and ask students what they see. The stories can be retold in various ways if one wants to activate what students have learned.

There are a number of commercial texts available for Intermediate High students, such

as Hueber's series "Lesetexte Deutsch" (Grundstufe). Good results were obtained with Edith Schmitz's *Schreck in der Abendstunde: Kurzkrimis zum Selberlosen*. It is a collection of detective stories with a riddle. These were assigned as outside reading in a fifth-semester class. Since the texts themselves contain questions and clues toward their solution, students were simply asked to write down the solution to the riddles posed in the story. The degree of understanding to which these texts should be read is predetermined by the texts themselves. Their main purpose is to provide students with reasonably motivating input beyond what goes on in class.

Many textbooks and readers contain texts by authors such as Helga Novak (Moeller/Liedloff, p. 348). The grammar is easy but the texts have an absurdist content. Such texts cannot be recommended as input texts since one cannot really process them top-down. The result of the bottom-up reading does not jell into identifiable schemata and thus leaves students unsure of their understanding. Students understand the sentences, but may not know why the story is told. Such texts challenge the traditions of storytelling and their events cannot be discussed easily in either English or German.

TEXTBOOK TEXT

Some remarks are in order about a fairly typical reading selection from a textbook (Moeller/Liedloff, p. 319-321). Textbook texts tend to be non-texts, and one always has some difficulties dealing with them. Our example talks about leisure time activites in Germany. The students can transfer their own schemata to the general topic. They can also learn some facts about the length of the work week or the school day, etc. The text talks in some detail about two (presumably fictitious) German students and their respective activites. Our students can quite easily relate to what one of them does, since his activities revolve around going to lectures, the library, bars, and a movie theater. The other student's involvement with her study of music and a citizens' action group is more foreign to most students and also is not very typical for Germans in general. The text then trails off to touch upon some other examples of leisure-time behavior.

The text naturally incorporates the grammatical principles presented in the chapter, in this case the subjunctive. The appropriate parts of the text were picked out as illustrations. The text topic was used to ork on writing and speaking skills. Students were asked to prepare a questionnaire on leisure-time activities. Many took ideas from the text and incorporated them into their personalized questions. In class, they worked in pairs eliciting answers to their questions and then reporting their findings to the class. In other words, this specific text was put to use as a grammar display text, and its topic and vocabulary were then used to expand students' active abilities.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

The question of text selection brings up the question of authentic texts. The debate on this is popular, but mostly beside the point. While unaltered texts written by native speakers to communicate with each other are essential for testing reading proficiency, the point in teaching is not whether a <u>text</u> is authentic, but whether the <u>reading situation</u> is authentic.

A letter written by a German in Germany with intent to communicate something to someone is doubtlessly an authentic text. However, if this text is read by people it was

not addressed to, the reading situation is not authentic. While researchers, the police, or the IRS will occasionally read letters not addressed to them, authentic reading situations require that the text be intended for the reader in some form, either as a personal communication or a public statement. It is part of true communication that the sender of a message adjust his message to the receiver both in presuppositions and in linguistic difficulty. Consequently, the 'inauthentic' text may be the one for an authentic reading situation, if it is written with intent to communicate something to someone. Just because the addressee is a learner of German and the sender adjusts his/her language (rough tuning) does not make the reading situation inauthentic. Of course, learners must be able to understand texts that are not written for foreigners if they are to have high proficiency. But there is nothing wrong with texts that take the learners' limitations into account, as long as they are not mistaken to be the same as texts that natives use to communicate among each other.

To read texts that natives use to communicate with each other, students must have the same background that natives have on some level (the linguistic level being not up to par). Areas of congruence may concern anything from interculturally transferable functions of life to the highly formalized events of science. It is in these contexts that students are most likely to be able to process top-down with accuracy, be they scientists reading scholarly articles or first-year students reading a children's story. Insofar as literature often deals with universal human questions, literary texts remain prime candidates for authentic reading situations.

Assuming that we are all expert in checking texts for unconquerable grammar and/or vocabulary, there is a simple technique to test whether a narrative text is likely to be processable from the top down: Can you retell the story in three to five shortish sentences in English so that your students would accept it as a story? The sentences must retell the events, not describe the text. If you can summarize in such a fashion, there are probably not too many presuppositions and the text has proper closure. Students will most likely be able to read such a story with ease.

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The picture of the train station was taken from *Oxford-Duden Picture German-English Dictionary*. New York: OUP, Clarendon, 1979.